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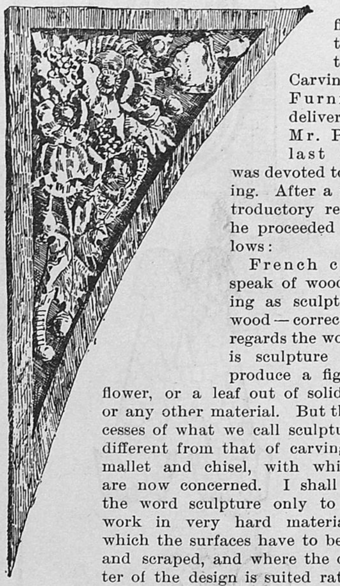
WOOD CARVING.

BY J. HUNGERFORD POLLEN.



THE first of the lectures on Carving and Furniture, delivered by Mr. Pollen last session was devoted to Carving. After a few introductory remarks, he proceeded as follows:

French critics speak of wood carving as sculpture in wood — correctly as regards the word. It is sculpture if we produce a figure, a flower, or a leaf out of solid wood or any other material. But the processes of what we call sculpture are different from that of carving with mallet and chisel, with which we are now concerned. I shall apply the word sculpture only to woodwork in very hard materials, in which the surfaces have to be bored and scraped, and where the character of the design is suited rather to the gallery or the shelves of a collector than to the decoration of walls or furniture.

Sumptuous and well-made furniture is produced in London and other large cities, but carved cornices, carved panel moldings, carved fireplaces, doorways, and so on, are so very rare that we have to rouse attention to the carvers' art as if it were a revival. Nevertheless, the value in which carved work is held may be measured by the prices at which the fragments of Old London are being bought up, and the place which many of these fragments occupy in our national museums.

I think it may be maintained, looking at Old London, that wood in our climate is the due complement of stone and brick. It is the inside lining of which the hard material is the outer coat. Wood panels are not freezing to the touch. They make interiors warm and comfortable as well as rich and dignified. From the ease with which the materials can be cut, we get effectual decoration in actual relief of light and shade, and, once done, it is found to be as durable as the walls of the house, and in no danger of those dismal chips and peelings to which the plasterer's work is so subject.

I was struck with the contrast between the present system and the older one by what I saw in a beautiful country house not long since. The house itself is old, the exterior finely carved in stone. The interior has been refitted and arranged at a great cost. The woodwork of shutters and dados in two woods is admirably fitted. All that the steam plane and modelling irons can do is finished to perfection.

On the other hand, when I looked for carvings, I found lines of molding, key frets, and so forth, not carved in wood but in lengths of stamped putty or other compositions glued on. In no long time I observed much of this applied composition curling up and coning off. The builder had to renew it. It struck me with astonishment that where so many thousand pounds were spent on joiner's work, one or two hundred could not have been devoted to carving.

Now let us consider what the opportunities of the carver are, and what different methods of treatment he has at his command. There are the beams of which parts of all houses are constructed, and which, being of wood, are to be carved when the style of the architecture exposes them to view, as in church and hall roofs, rooms in which the joints of the floor above are exposed, etc.

As beams and timbers are concentrations of strength, they often have to bear walls that exceed their thickness and project beyond their edges, such as door lintels, architraves, and the like. In these cases it is the angular edge, or so much of the edge as will not impair the strength of joists or rafters that can be carved effectively.

In the case of a post, such as a stair newel, the king post of a Gothic roof, both edges and sides can be carved—extra length of wood being allowed for the purpose above the stair newels or below the king posts—without interfering with the actual purpose of these posts, either in reality or apparently, apparent strength being necessary to due effectiveness. As to running moldings worked on edges, whether of beams, joists, rafters, or rails of any kind; or again, on the angles of door and window jambs and lintels, or on the framework of panels, the distinct rolls and hollows of which they consist must be limited in number. There should never be less than three, that a due proportion between the members may be maintained, nor should they be too numerous. Brackets have so many distinct ends projecting over the other. Cornices are made up of rows of brackets, or are one continuous running bracket. In this way cornices represent thickness of wood projecting from the wall one above another, and should represent, say, an upper, a middle, and a lower projection.

We ought to preserve this idea in complicated cornices and give emphasis to the middle feature; then there will be a group of lines above it and a group of lines below. These groups break the angle between roof and wall, or anything that represents roof, such as the top of a chimney-piece, of a doorway, and so forth. When you see an unmeaning succession of repeated moldings, as you often do in builders' decoration, you will feel that the real idea of their relation to each other has never been grasped.

If from solid timbers we pass to wall surfaces. it is obvious that large wall spaces can be only covered by framed paneling. The framework must be of sufficient thickness to be grooved to take the panels, and this extra thickness has to be relieved from the heavy appearance of a more thick edge. We have to ease down the edge by moldings or lines in relief, some bolder, others finer, as the edges of the frame decrease till they meet the panel.

In a large room cut up into paneling, the general effect will depend on the size and proportions of the panels, to height and width of the room and of the rows of panels to each other. Paneling requires to have some rows taller than others, and to have upper and lower rows of less height than the general order. Upon the size of the panels will depend the boldness and size of the moldings. We meet with large daneling in which the moldings are planted into the junction of frame and panel, and exceed the thickness of both. I do not think it a good feature, and it is often a vulgarism.

In carving moldings there are two rules to observe—one, that the general form and outline of the original lines, or bars, or hollows molded by the plane have to be preserved; another rule is that no work put upon these features ought to be allowed to quarrel with the direction of their lines. Foliage or plaited ornaments should run at right angles with that direction, and be delicate enough to lose themselves at a distance, at which the original molding only can be distinguished. But in all large surfaces of paneling the greater quantity of molding will be worked mechanically by a plane iron filed to the curvature required

If you examine the small paneling of the fifteenth century, much of it will be found to have been executed by a tool worked by the fingers after the wood has been framed together. The moldings die down without meeting in the angles, but these moldings are necessarily small and shallow. On furniture, chests, and other more important joinery, moldings seem to have been cut throughout with the carver's gouge. Here, then, we have the treatment of edges of panels. How effective they can be made I need not say.

Panels are sometimes made of wood, so thick as to be brought up to the level of the rails that frame them, and reduced by wide bevelings to meet the grooves of stiles and rails. The thick parts are left with a defined edge as though a thin extra plank were added to the thickness. I consider that the proper purpose of this thickness is to allow of carving. Carving in these parts has to be in very low relief—historical subjects or leaf-work compositions. Figure carving in such places is sometimes of extraordinary merit. Examples can be seen among the cabinets of the Soulages collection in the Kensington Museum.

There are, of course, parts or features of all interiors in which the carver has to put forth all his powers, those in which bold relief can be employed—door heads, fireplaces, and other prominent features. Here will come figure work, bold foliage, heraldry, and the like.

Generally and broadly speaking, what is it that makes carving effective? Not extreme skill in cutting, nor absolute imitations of nature, however good. It is a knowledge of, or rather, an habitual recognition of, laws that govern all composed design which becomes what we know by the word feeling.

We have spoken of moldings on the edges of woodwork, and of composition of foliage and figures, heraldry, and other ornamental composition. What is the law that govern the due prominence and arrangement of lines and masses? I consider moldings as bars or borders of light, separated just so much from the surface to which they form an edge as to show their outline.

This first edging is the largest and widest, as it is on the thick portion of the wood; on its shaded side it dies gradually until it ends in a smaller roll, and then, perhaps, a sharp arris.

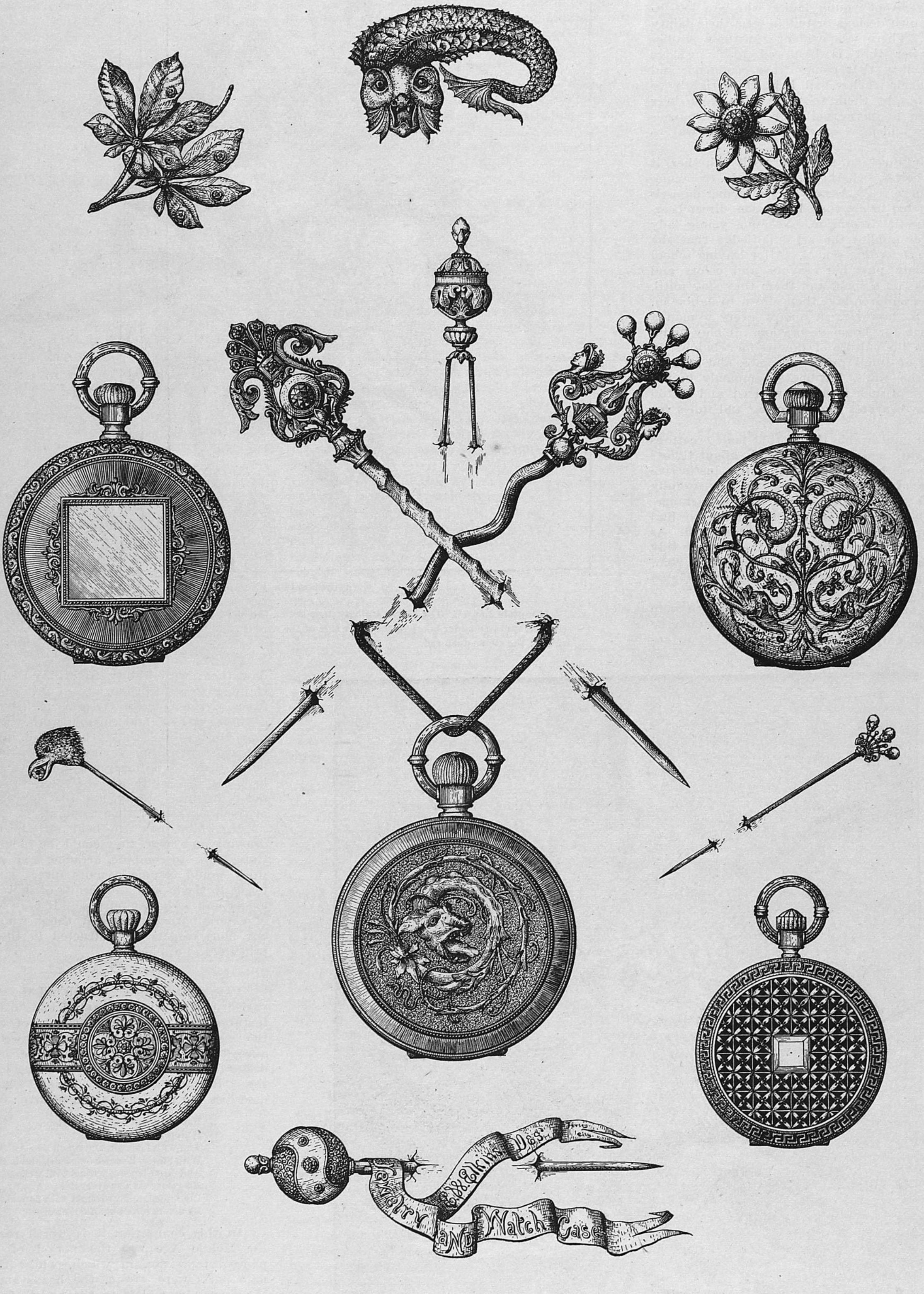
If you watch the growth and decay of styles of architecture, it is in the multiplication or breaking up or loss of meaning of moldings that these stages of decay and corruption are most obvious. Moldings form three-fourths of the carver's work. Carry this principle further into the composition of carved groups, such as fill sunk panels or pediments. One may be able to carve the figure of a man, a lion, or a piece of foliage, but so to combine a number of such figures as to make each of them evident, to give the grace or the force that belongs to each of them respectively, and when combined to form an agreeable and well-balanced composition of masses and line of light, here is the difficulty.

Regarding the amount of detachment or absolute relief that good carving in such cases ought to have, it will depend on the character of lightness and of movement the carver wishes to give his work. Generally, carving of this kind should never lose touch in appearance from the mass to which it belongs, and should die gradually into the shadow. Much excellent carved work loses value from too much under cutting even in the work of so great an artist as Grinling Gibbons.

Further, if carving is not to appear as if it floated in a disproportioned sea of shadow, neither should it be so crowded up as to become indistinct. Nor can decorative carving be carried except to a limited degree to the direct imitation of nature.

As nature would not join animal and vegetable life together, so we are to represent natural life and living objects not as if we were making definite pictures of them, but such features of their nature as will gracefully express the arrangements of light and lines as are required for our immediate purpose, and no further. The value of light and its concentration on masses of relief is of the first consequence to the carver, grace of line is second. Not that the two are separable, but the composition of masses seems to me the more difficult of the two.—*The Artist*, London.

AN ODD PICTURE FRAME.—The pupils in the art department of Adelphi Academy in Brooklyn, presented to their principal recently a portrait of himself drawn by one of the most adept of their associates, and unique in setting. What the worthy gentleman was apparently called upon to receive was a handsomely carved easel with inscription on a miniature palette affixed to the cross-bar and bearing a square panel. The panel was bordered with painted flowers and grasses that nodded about a large white oval which filled the center of it, and was decorated in colors. This panel, however, divided in the middle and flew apart at the proper moment, showing that it was but a pair of doors that might be opened and closed at will, and the portrait was within them. The doors were fastened to the frame proper with ornamental brass hinges not visible from the outside, and were lined with plaited satin gathered by a rosette at the center. The frame was designed by Mr. J. B. Whittaker, head of the art department, and it is a notable innovation in the manner of setting a picture.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